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Pattern of conferences

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Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/64/136). The Committee also had before it the draft report of the Committee on Conferences for 2009,* as well as the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences. During its consideration of the report, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification.

2. The report of the Secretary-General, which was submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 63/248, covers the utilization of conference-servicing resources, the impact of the capital master plan, integrated global management and various issues pertaining to documentation, translation and interpretation. The report also outlines progress made in the implementation of specific initiatives related to the improvement of conference services, proposes means to address current challenges and puts forward suggestions as to further steps that could be taken to ensure the optimal functioning of the management of conferences at the United Nations.

3. The Advisory Committee has already commented in some detail on matters relating to conference servicing in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2010-2011 (A/64/7). **Therefore, the present report should be considered in conjunction with that report.**

Integrated global management

4. Issues relating to integrated global management are discussed in paragraphs 8 to 12 of the Secretary-General's report. During the reporting period, the Office of Internal Oversight Services, at the request of the Under-Secretary-General for

* The final version of the report of the Committee on Conferences will be issued as document A/64/32.

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General Assembly and Conference Management, undertook an evaluation of the progress achieved in integrated global management with a view, in particular, to examining the extent to which the process had yielded measurable gains in terms of improved coherence of delivery and/or financial savings (see A/63/509, para. 8, and A/64/7, para. I.60). The outcome of that evaluation is contained in document A/64/166.

5. In its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2010-2011, the Advisory Committee reiterated its support for the concept of integrated global management as a means of maximizing the efficient use of resources and improving the overall quality of conference services. However, the Committee also noted that the budget document submitted by the Secretary-General did not contain any information about the financial savings achieved or anticipated as a result of its implementation (see A/64/7, para. I.59). At that time, the Committee was informed that, rather than to generate savings, the main objective of integrated global management was to improve and harmonize work processes across the conference-servicing duty stations, thereby increasing quality, efficiency and effectiveness (ibid.).

6. During its consideration of the Secretary-General's report, the Advisory Committee, bearing in mind both the specific focus of the evaluation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (see para. 4 above) and the various General Assembly resolutions calling on the Department to achieve its objectives as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible (see, inter alia, resolutions 59/265, 62/225 and 63/248), once again enquired as to the measurable financial savings yielded as a result of the implementation of integrated global management. It was reiterated to the Committee that the pursuit of financial savings had never been the main objective of integrated global management and that, although the potential benefits of harmonization, economies of scale and simplification of processes all pointed to more efficiency, benefits such as better succession planning, global outreach, policy coherence, better quality of service, more timely availability of parliamentary documents and advance waiver management did not lend themselves to easy quantification in financial terms.

7. In that connection, the Advisory Committee recalls that, in its above-mentioned first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2010-2011, it discussed the issue of cost-accounting and noted, inter alia, that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had already developed a costing model and tools to quantify conference-servicing costs (see A/64/7, para. I.63). In fact, annex I to the Secretary-General's report on the pattern of conferences contains a performance matrix for the Department, which includes notional unit costs for outputs and services. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the costing model used by the Department had been in place since the 1980s and had last been updated in 2003. The Department intended to review and further refine the model and, in collaboration with the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts, to update the underlying unit costs.

8. **The Advisory Committee reiterates its view that better knowledge of the costs of activities would be advantageous and would provide a better basis for assessing the efficiency of administrative functions, the cost-effectiveness of work processes and the impact of new administrative systems (see A/64/7, para. I.62), thereby enabling the Department's managers to determine the most**

effective ways to implement mandates. Therefore, the Committee also reiterates its earlier recommendation that the Department's existing methodologies for the collection and analysis of costing information be further developed (ibid., para. I.64).

9. The Advisory Committee notes the status report on integrated global management contained in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Secretary-General's report, in which the Secretary-General states that the Department is in broad agreement with the findings and recommendations of the evaluation undertaken by the Office of Internal Oversight Services. **In order to enhance the likelihood that measures taken within the framework of integrated global management will further contribute to improving the Department's performance, the Committee recommends that the Secretary-General's next report on the pattern of conferences outline the specific steps taken to implement the findings and recommendations that have been accepted.**

10. On a related matter, in paragraph 10 of his report, the Secretary-General provides a status update on the three information technology projects that are to provide the management tools indispensable for the full implementation of integrated global management. In this regard, the Advisory Committee notes that project 3, document planning and management, has encountered challenges owing to the disparity of the working methods and current systems used in the various duty stations, differences in predictability of workload and uncertainty as to the nature of the overall information technology architecture and the platform to be adopted throughout the United Nations. The Committee further notes that, on the advice of the Chief Information Technology Officer, it was agreed to re-engineer the next iteration of project 3 on the basis of a thoroughly reorganized documents management workflow currently being developed by the Meetings and Publishing Division and on the adoption by the Department of the Documentum information technology platform, consistent with the Office of Information and Communications Technology decision for the United Nations as a whole. Project 3 will thus require further redesigning and implementation in 2010.

11. **The Advisory Committee is disappointed to learn that, after having spent several years working on project 3, the Department will, in essence, have to start again from the beginning. The Committee urges the Department, in designing and implementing the next iteration of project 3, to cooperate closely with the Office of Information and Communications Technology to ensure, in particular, that the selected platform fully meets the needs of all conference-servicing duty stations and that it is compatible with other relevant applications Organization-wide.**

Capital master plan

12. Paragraphs 53 to 59 of the Secretary-General's report address the impact of the capital master plan on meetings held at Headquarters during its implementation. According to the Secretary-General, one of the challenges the Department will face during the renovation of the Headquarters complex is the fact that staff servicing meetings in the conference rooms will be based in swing space at 300 East 42nd Street. As only a minimum level of staffing can be maintained in the Temporary North Lawn Building due to space restrictions, the majority of staff will have to travel constantly from their off-site locations, up to nine blocks away from the

Headquarters complex, to the Conference Building and back. In his report, the Secretary-General also outlines the arrangements for ensuring the ongoing provision of a full range of technical support to staff located in temporary swing space. He points out that, as neither storage space to facilitate prompt access to stock items nor office space to accommodate rotational support staff has been made available to any of the new locations, the ability of the Help Desk and the Stock and Inventory Group to provide the required services will undoubtedly be tested.

13. The Advisory Committee recalls that the Department has more than a dozen mission-critical systems which will be expected to operate smoothly with continued maintenance and support by the Information and Communications Technology Section during the construction period (see A/63/509, para. 16). **The Committee therefore stresses, once again, the importance of ensuring that proper support is provided throughout the capital master plan to ensure uninterrupted service.**

Documents management

14. The Advisory Committee notes that, as at 30 June 2009, the overall compliance with submission guidelines for pre-session documentation had risen to 71 per cent, which is higher than in 2007 (61 per cent) and on a par with 2008. At the same time, overall compliance with issuance time frames increased to 73 per cent, up from 66 per cent in 2007 and 72 per cent in 2008. According to the Secretary-General, further improvement is contingent on more timely submission of documents, adequate intervals between the adoption of new mandates by intergovernmental bodies and the time of consideration of the relevant documents, and the length of budgetary and performance reports, since such reports have been exempt from page-limit requirements. The Secretary-General points out that the latter reports have often proved to be very disruptive to documentation processing, since priority is accorded to their issuance at the expense of other documents already in the pipeline.

15. In this regard, the Advisory Committee notes that the Department continues to work closely with committee secretaries to synchronize the programme of work of intergovernmental bodies with the availability of documents. In this connection, and pursuant to section IV of General Assembly resolution 63/248, particular attention has been devoted to ways and means of improving the timely submission of documents to the Fifth Committee (see A/63/735). Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that, while there was little in the way of incentives to encourage author departments to submit documents in a more timely fashion, the Department was focusing on raising awareness of the work involved in documents processing in the hope that greater understanding among author departments would lead to better compliance with the time frames and page limits set out in the relevant General Assembly resolutions. **The Committee stresses that the timely submission of documentation is key to the effective implementation of the Department's mandate and therefore urges all author departments to comply with submission deadlines and page-limit requirements.**

16. The specific challenges associated with the continuing development of the activities of the Human Rights Council are described in paragraphs 67 to 71 of the Secretary-General's report. In particular, the Secretary-General points out that, on 18 June 2009, the Human Rights Council took a decision in which it recalled that the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review was entrusted with the

authority to decide on the adoption of reports that exceptionally exceeded the word limits previously established by the Council (see A/64/53, chap. I, decision 11/117). The Secretary-General further indicates that 13 outcome documents of the Council's universal periodic review process which, according to the Department, far exceeded the allowable length were delivered to the Division of Conference Management for processing long after the slotting deadline had passed. Since the Division could not process those documents on time due to other commitments, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management declined the waiver request.

17. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Division of Conference Management at Geneva had translated all the universal periodic review documents that had been submitted on time and within the established word limits; it was those submitted after the slotting deadline and in excess of the allowable length that had not been translated, since capacity was planned in accordance with the documents submission schedule. The Committee was also informed that the Department's decision to prioritize the processing of reports of the above-mentioned Working Group had led to the creation of a backlog of summary records of the proceedings of the Human Rights Council and its subsidiary bodies amounting to some 5 million words. It was not made clear to the Committee how that backlog would be addressed.

18. As indicated in paragraph 69 of the Secretary-General's report, on 24 June 2009 the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management requested the Office of Legal Affairs to provide a legal opinion on whether the Human Rights Council, as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, could grant one of its intergovernmental working groups — the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review — the authority to decide upon its own word limits for the reports that it adopts. In the opinion, a copy of which was provided, upon request, to the Advisory Committee, the Office of Legal Affairs concluded that the decision of 18 June 2009 did not contain wording that granted the Working Group the authority to adopt reports that exceeded the 32-page limit established by the General Assembly for its subsidiary organs and intergovernmental bodies (see inter alia, General Assembly resolutions 51/211, 52/214, 53/208 and 59/265). The Office therefore opined that approval by the General Assembly of the decision of 18 June 2009 should be subject to the express understanding by the Assembly that the 32-page limit it has established would continue to apply to all reports of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review. According to the Office, any decision by the General Assembly that left room for doubt as to the authority of the Working Group to exceed the 32-page limit could require the Secretariat to edit and translate reports that exceeded that limit, a situation that would have significant financial implications for the Organization.

19. The Advisory Committee recalls that, in order to strengthen conference-servicing capacity in Geneva, and in particular to address the additional requirements generated by the activities of the Human Rights Council and its subsidiary bodies, the Secretary-General, in section 2 of his proposed programme budget for 2010-2011, is proposing to redeploy 12 posts (6 P-2 Associate Translators and 6 P-3 posts from the Copy Preparation and Proofreading Section) from New York to Geneva and to increase the level of resources allocated for temporary assistance for meetings (see A/64/7, para. 1.89). **The Committee reaffirms its support for those proposals. However, in view of its ongoing**

concerns about the adequacy of the additional capacity proposed, the Committee also reiterates its recommendation that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to monitor the situation closely and to report to it on any developments that might have financial implications (ibid.).

Matters related to translation and interpretation

20. Paragraphs 72 to 75 of the Secretary-General's report describe the measures taken and envisaged to address the demographic transition in the language services, which include increasing the number of competitive examinations for language staff and further pursuing the outreach programme that was established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 62/225. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, to date, memorandums of understanding on the training of potential candidates for language examinations had been signed with 12 universities covering all six official languages. The Department expected to sign further memorandums in the coming months.

21. In paragraph 75 of his report, the Secretary-General states that, given the continuing high number of retirements anticipated in the coming years, the issue of raising, or waiving, the mandatory age of separation for language staff is worthy of consideration. **In the Advisory Committee's view, the financial and administrative implications of raising or waiving the age of separation for one category of staff should be thoroughly explored, including from the perspective of equality of treatment, before a formal proposal is made.**

22. The long-standing question of how to fill current and future vacancies at the United Nations Office at Nairobi is addressed in paragraphs 87 to 89 of the Secretary-General's report. The Committee notes, in particular, that in order to attract additional language staff to Nairobi and to ensure that current staff show a willingness to stay, the Division of Conference Services would like to classify some interpreter and translator posts in Nairobi at a higher level. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that other incentives were also being considered, such as giving staff who had served in Nairobi for a certain number of years priority consideration for lateral transfers to other duty stations.

23. The Advisory Committee further notes that, during the reporting period, the services of a consultant were engaged to explore the possibility of providing enhanced training programmes to potential professional translators and interpreters on the African continent, thereby ensuring that there would be a pool of qualified language staff available in Africa to fill vacancies in Nairobi. On the basis of the recommendations contained in the consultant's report, a conference, bringing together the main stakeholders, was held in Nairobi in February 2009. The outcome of the conference was unanimous agreement on the way forward, offers of support for training by a number of European Union institutions and a commitment by the African Development Bank to find appropriate funding for the project. A core group of African universities is currently working together to come up with a common approach to establishing relevant master's degree programmes. Nairobi University is due to pilot the programme in September 2009.

24. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the proactive approach to staffing adopted by the Division of Conference Services in Nairobi and trusts that it will yield concrete results. Detailed information on the impact of the measures**

taken on vacancy rates among language staff serving in Nairobi should be included in the Secretary-General's next report on the pattern of conferences.

25. In paragraphs 76 to 80 of his report, the Secretary-General describes the steps taken, pursuant to section V, paragraph 13, of General Assembly resolution 62/225, to provide at all duty stations adequate staff at the appropriate grade level with a view to ensuring appropriate quality control for external translation. In particular, for the biennium 2010-2011, the Secretary-General is proposing to reclassify five P-4 Reviser posts to P-5 Senior Reviser posts at the United Nations Office at Vienna (see A/64/6 (Sect. 2), para. 2.79). In paragraph 78 of his report, the Secretary-General asserts that the proposal is cost neutral, and potentially even cost saving, since the increase in staff costs will be offset by the savings arising from a higher number of pages translated contractually rather than in-house. In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls that a total of 12 new P-5 Senior Reviser posts were approved and established during the biennium 2008-2009 (7 in the Documentation Division at Headquarters and 5 in the Languages Service at the United Nations Office at Geneva).

26. The Advisory Committee also notes from paragraph 80 of the report that the Department has continued its work on the common roster of contractual translators. Unified criteria for inclusion, evaluation and removal of translators and text-processors into or from the common roster were agreed upon at the coordination meeting of conference managers held in June 2009 and the standardized electronic template for quality control evaluation is in use. **The Advisory Committee notes the steps taken to respond to the General Assembly's requests concerning quality control for external translation and trusts that they will yield the expected results by helping to ensure the provision of language services of the highest quality.**

27. In paragraphs 81 to 86 of his report, the Secretary-General discusses the impact of freelance recruitment on the quality of interpretation at all duty stations. According to the Secretary-General, the principal factor affecting the quality of interpretation is the limited availability of interpreters on both the local and international markets. He states, in particular, that competition among international organizations and among duty stations is fierce and can, at times, lead to the recruitment of interpreters of less than optimal quality solely to meet demand. **In this connection, while the Advisory Committee understands that meeting cancellations or last-minute additions to the calendar of conferences and meetings cannot always be foreseen, it nevertheless stresses the importance of robust workload planning as a means of ensuring that adequate numbers of freelance interpreters who can perform to the required standard are recruited sufficiently in advance.**